Malay women as discerning viewers: Asian soap operas, consumer culture and negotiating modernity

Md Azalanshah Md Syed

To cite this article: Md Azalanshah Md Syed (2013) Malay women as discerning viewers: Asian soap operas, consumer culture and negotiating modernity, Gender, Place & Culture, 20:5, 647-663, DOI: 10.1080/0966369X.2012.709831

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2012.709831

Published online: 02 Aug 2012.

Article views: 498

View related articles

Citing articles: 2 View citing articles
Malay women as discerning viewers: Asian soap operas, consumer culture and negotiating modernity

Md Azalanshah Md Syed*

Department of Media Studies, Faculty of Art and Social Sciences, University of Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

This article examines how Malay women in remote Malaysian villages engage with images of transnational modernity shown in popular soap operas imported from other Asian countries. While the government promoted these Asian soap operas at first as appropriate vehicles for the cultural project of modernising the mindsets and attitudes of the masses, authorities have now expressed some discomfort and ambivalence about the excessive representation of consumer culture in these soaps, which they fear will compromise the cultural values of Malay women. However, I argue that Malay women are discerning viewers who are able to critically negotiate the images of consumer culture in these soaps without necessarily ignoring their cultural values or social responsibilities. This debate about whether these soaps broaden the mindsets of Malay women viewers or teach them degenerate values of consumerist culture is part of an ongoing contestation over the cultural ramifications of modernity in Malaysia. This television genre of Asian soaps can be conceptualised as a site for negotiating modernity, where Malay women derive pleasure from the consumerist modernity depicted in the Asian soap operas while remaining mindful of the strictures posed by local culture.

Keywords: Malay women; modernity; Malaysia; soap opera; consumer culture

Television, soap operas and modernity

Globalisation has introduced complex cultural interconnections between diverse locations. It has been argued that ‘places are no longer the clear supports of our identity’ (Morley and Robins 1995, 87). Now sites other than the nation can profoundly influence the formation of identity and an important channel influencing identity-formation in today’s world is the electronic media. As Appadurai (1996, 3) argues, electronic media is the prime vehicle governing, shaping and modifying popular imagination in contemporary life. In his words:

the electronic media decisively change the wider field of mass media and other traditional media. Such media transforms the field of mass mediation because they offer new resources and new disciplines for the construction of imagined selves and imagined worlds.

Given this scenario, electronic media, especially television, has emerged as a ubiquitous and influential technological site channelling discourses that can shape the identities of people in diverse locations. In his studies of the role of television in everyday life, Silverstone claims that ‘television is a domestic medium … it is part of our domestic culture … providing in its programming and its schedules models and structures of domestic life, or at least of certain versions of domestic life’ (1994, 24). Television is a pervasive feature of
everyday culture and a node for consumption of popular culture for women whose lives revolve around the private space of the household. In particular, women have a particular affinity with soap operas and this genre of popular culture has played a large role in shaping women’s notions of modern life.

The crucial role played by media, such as television, in the construction of social identity has alerted governments to the dangers of alternative cultural sources shaping the mindsets and attitudes of their people. Particularly, in Malaysia the authorities have now begun to take a vigilant stance against the immensely popular television genre of soap operas imported from other Asian countries. The state seeks to open local audiences to a wider world of modernity and socio-economic mobility, while stemming any threat that may endanger the ‘purity’ of Malay cultural identity. They argue that these Asian soap operas will incite Malay women to transgress bonds of local culture and identity, which will then jeopardise the state’s vision of Malaysian modernity (Bernama 2006a, 2006b, 2007a, 2007b). Malay women are not only the main viewers of these soap operas, but it has generally been noted that Malay women have also emerged as the prime target of the state’s cultural and moral anxieties in the nation’s encounter with modernity (Stivens 1998a). Thus, the debate over Asian soap operas has emerged as an important site for exploring how Malay women engage with modernity and its cultural implications.

Soap operas or soaps have been identified by many scholars as potent vehicles for disseminating values of capitalist modernity and consumer culture (Brown 1994; Chua 2004; Chua and Iwabuchi 2008; Geraghty 1991; Hobson 2003; Iwabuchi 2002; Spence 2005). The association between soap operas and consumer culture runs deep. Soaps are sponsored by manufacturers of retail consumer goods and are mostly targeted at housewives (Brown 1994; Cantor and Pingree 1983; Geraghty 1991; Hobson 2003; Spence 2005). In fact, the term soap opera was coined for these television programmes because they were produced by detergent manufacturers such as Procter and Gamble, Colgate Palmolive and Lever Brothers (Allen 1985; Cantor and Pingree 1983). According to Waldrop and Crispell (1988, 29), soap operas were created to sell household goods to women through an ingenious use of entertainment that created women audiences and attracted audience numbers not possible by direct advertising alone. Thus, the origin of the genre shows that soap opera is a form of entertainment deeply enmeshed with consumer culture and variously a ‘narrative form, cultural product, advertising vehicle and source of aesthetic pleasure’ (Allen 1985, 4). Some scholars have also argued that television commercials are a potent cultural artefact with the ability to generate notions of everyday life for their audiences. By the constant bombardment of messages about consumer goods that purport to support shared common interests of women, advertisements create storylines about the needs of everyday life, imbricate themselves in the imagination of everyday life for women viewers and ‘forge an imagined solidarity among women’ (Spence 2005, 143). Furthermore, media texts such as soap operas also expand viewers’ imagination beyond the constraints of their personal lives, physical locales and cultural boundaries. As Appadurai (1996) claims, electronic media such as television shape the way in which people now imagine themselves and the worlds they inhabit.

**Asian soap operas and debate over modernity in Malaysia**

Popular culture is a crucial domain of modern life which is often used to channel the aims and projects of building a new regime, in this case one of modernity. In the early 1990s, imported soap operas largely from Asian countries were promoted by the Malaysian authorities, especially United Malays National Organization (UMNO), as being suitable vehicles for the
cultural project of modernising the mindsets and attitudes of the masses. Under the rubric of the discourse of Asian Values and Look East Policy, the Malaysian government imported television programmes, mainly soap operas, from Asian countries such as Japan, Korea, Indonesia and Philippines. The government saw these soaps as appropriate vehicles for educating the masses about the modernised lifestyles of industrialised East Asian nations. They also promoted content from culturally proximate locations such as Indonesia. These strategies were meant to counter the domination of American programmes, especially the influence of American consumerism on local audiences.

Reports in the local press now estimate that millions of Malay women regularly tune into Japanese, Korean, Filipino, Thai and Indonesian soaps screened on local television channels (Farinordin 2003; John, Damis and Chelvi 2003a, 2003b). In spite of the fact that these Asian soaps are not dubbed in Malay and have to be watched with Malay subtitles, the appetite for this television genre continues to grow among Malay women. I focus on Asian soaps in this article because not only do they still draw the highest TRP (Target Rating Point) ratings in the country, but also these Asian soaps are transnational media artefacts which are entangled in contentious issues around modernity, globalisation and local culture.

While initially promoted by the government, discussions around these Asian soaps are now hedged with concerns about the effect of capitalist modernity on Malay cultural life. These consumerism-driven soaps have become a target of criticism of the local authorities, particularly UMNO that argues that Malay women will deviate from the social norms of Malay adat1 and Islamic faith, two important elements that define Malay culture and identity. The women’s wing of UMNO, Puteri UMNO urged the government to ‘curb the addiction to soap operas which deviated from the Islamic faith or propagated new ideas to do wrong, practice free sex or damage society’s norms and social fabric’. The Puteri UMNO spokesperson asked the broadcasting authorities to not ‘slip in a slot or airtime with dramas that go against our culture during the time for Zuhur, Asar and Maghrib2 prayers’ (Bernama 2006b). In unison with the UMNO women’s wing’s condemnation of these soaps, UMNO youth wing also criticised these soaps for compromising religious faith, cultural values and domestic duties of Malay women and even deforming the national project of modernity for an enlightened middle class.

However, I want to make an argument that offers a more nuanced understanding of this issue and counters this perception of the state that Malay women will simply reject their cultural values under the influence of these consumerism-driven soap operas. First, Malay women are not naïve, unthinking viewers who passively consume these visual images of consumer culture. Rather, they are more rightly seen as discerning consumers with sophisticated viewing tactics who deal with the visual images of transnational modernity and consumer culture in complex ways. As Barker (2000, 269) claims, audiences are knowledgeable, dynamic and ‘active producers of meaning’ within their sociocultural boundaries. Second, although many previous scholars have acclaimed the potential of soap opera to be a particularly potent site for women to stage resistance against their patriarchal social order (Brown 1994; Geraghty 1991; Lee and Cho 1990), I want to extend this view with regard to the specificities of the Malay context where I find that women are still deeply attached to the dominant ideological discourses of adat and Islam. Instead of claiming outright resistance against the patriarchal Malay social order, their responses manifested a process of negotiation where they engaged with the potentially contentious elements of consumer culture on these soap operas by accommodating the strictures imposed on them by Malay culture. Malay women viewers engage in a mode of negotiation where they consistently position the ideological discourses of adat and Islam as their cultural resources as discerning consumers who derive pleasure from these soaps without losing all sense of
their cultural constraints. Wilson (2004, 110) points out that Malay audiences who watch American television programmes such as L.A Law and Oprah Winfrey Show exercise creative judgment in the process of reinterpretation of these foreign programmes. According to him, such ‘a tactical reading is able to poach from textual content of one ideological persuasion to construct support for an opposing worldview. The moral polarity of a program can be reversed’. I argue that Malay women display such competencies of ‘tactical reading’ to selectively adopt appropriate elements of consumer culture shown in these soaps while rejecting those that transgress local cultural norms.

Research methodology

I present findings from a qualitative survey of Malay women fans of Asian soap operas in a remote Malaysian kampung area of Kota Tinggi, Johore. I found this setting to be appropriate for the study for many reasons. First, this region has good access to all the television channels; women audiences here are avid followers of Asian soaps and spend a significant amount of time watching these soaps. While a number of respondents have paid subscriptions with satellite networks such as ASTRO, most of them prefer to watch these Asian soap operas on the free-to-air channels run by Malaysian and Indonesian networks. Second, I was born in Kota Tinggi, hence I am very familiar with the setting and this has advantages such as access to social networks for procuring respondents and the ability to establish an easy rapport with them.

I was able to identify seven appropriate respondents for the study through purposeful sampling and snowballing. With purposeful sampling the focus is on a research design for ‘selecting those times, settings and individuals that can provide … [the researcher] … with the information that you need to answer your research question’ (Maxwell 2005, 88). I asked the leader of the local women’s committee to contact some of her friends who in turn led us to other possible respondents. This method – called the snowballing technique (Taylor and Bogdan 1998) – is used for gathering the requisite number of appropriate respondents through existent respondents. I must note here that this snowballing technique may have led me to choose women who knew each other and belonged to the same socio-economic demographic. However, I do not focus on the impact of their class and socio-economic background on their attitudes because in my initial interviews I found that the respondents shared similar cultural sensibilities regardless of the minor socio-economic differences between them. I must also note here that in the interviews I did not select specific programmes for discussion (as in the case studies conducted by Ida 2006; Iwabuchi 2002, 2004), but instead I let my respondents talk about whichever Asian soap they preferred. This method enabled a more spontaneous discussion in the interviews.

The Malay women in this research cannot be categorised as Asian soap opera fans per se, as the term is understood in audience research (Baym 2000; Brown 1994; Hobson 1982, 2003; Jenkins 1991, 1992, 2006). Jenkins (1992, 23) defines ‘fans’ as ‘readers who appropriate popular texts and reread them in a fashion that serves different interests, as spectators who transform the experience of watching television into a rich and complex participatory culture’. But my respondents tend to be what Jenkins calls ‘habitual followers’. As habitual followers, they watch Asian soaps regularly and closely even on a daily basis, but they do not mind it if they miss an episode or two.

I chose a small number of respondents because the initial fieldwork showed that the answers from the women were not only quite uniform in terms of content, but the feedback also reached saturation point quickly (Lee, Woo and Mackenzie 2002; Mason 2010) in terms of the research themes that could be derived from these casual discussions. Therefore, it was
decided that a smaller sample size and in-depth interviews would be more appropriate for the study. It was understood that the interviewee was protected and details such as real name and location were to be kept anonymous. My respondents were more open, cooperative and comfortable in the one-on-one interviews unlike the initial focus-group interviews that tended to be dominated by the opinion leader and only yielded very short and cursory answers from the respondents. Many respondents preferred to be interviewed personally in their homes instead of participating in the focus group in an outside location. Some of them were also averse to the focus-group interviews because of the possibility of confrontation with other respondents or the risk of unintentionally offending others with their statements.

While the relatively small size of my focus group may raise doubts about the representativeness of the study, I must note here that this study does not present an overall picture of the patterns of consumption of Asian soaps among Malay women. Instead it seeks to conduct an in-depth exploration of the perceptions and attitudes of Malay women to Asian soap operas and this necessitated a small select sample group of women who were comfortable to discuss the topic with the researcher. As I noted earlier, these women belong to a provincial Malay Muslim population in the nation’s heartland. It can be argued that their attitudes and perceptions represent the most telling case of the tensions between the effect of modernity and the boundaries set by Malay culture. For both these reasons of logistical necessity of conducting in-depth interviews and the inherent characteristic of the group of kampung Malay women chosen in the study, I think that the small sample size does not contradict or fall short of the aims of the study.

Asian soap operas, consumer culture and the question of modernity

While consumer culture has been imbricated with this genre since its origin, it was not until the 1980s when American soaps such as *Dallas* and *Dynasty* became a global phenomenon that consumer culture began to hold dominance in the thematic content of the soaps in a spectacular way. According to Ang (1985, 2), *Dallas* symbolises a new modern age of television history underscored by the promotion of an American lifestyle that revolved around consumer culture in these soaps. Geraghty (1991, 121) notes that while opulence was often depicted in American soaps, this is now filtered through the lens of consumer culture. Enjoying luxury was not depicted as an inaccessible lifestyle reserved for the privileged few, but was now shown as an aspirational ideal accessible to any viewer who could muster the economic power to indulge in the consumer culture freely available in the market. Although there is no previous research about Malay women’s response to soaps such as *Dallas* and *Dynasty* that were famous in 1980s, newspaper reports from that period show that these were quite popular among Malay viewers and even my respondents recalled these soaps in their discussions (Karthigesu 1994).

The notions of individual choice, upward mobility and unhindered interaction with the outside world promoted by consumer culture in soaps foster a sense of modernity for audiences. Apart from being laced with images of conspicuous consumption, soap operas act as a vehicle for consumer culture because they forge and disseminate mundane cultural trends that can be easily replicated and followed by mass audiences. As Hobson notes with regard to the Australian soaps *Neighbours* and *Home and Away*, which are also popular in Britain and New Zealand, ‘the youth culture which features in some of the Australian soap operas ... gave rise to a fashion that reflected the surfing clothes ... becoming a major fashion item for young men’ (2003, 68).

Just like these soap operas in the Western world, their non-Western counterparts are also deeply enmeshed with consumer culture (Iwabuchi 2008). For example, the main
attraction of a genre called trendy drama in Japan is the glamorous depiction of urban lifestyle and fashion with a consumerist focus that ‘truly forge a new life style for women in modern days with a Japanese situation, representing urban life and consumption’ (Matsuda and Higashi 2006, 19). These trendy dramas are also immensely popular in other parts of Asia where audiences emulate the fashionable images of the Japanese characters. For example, Ko reports: ‘Japanese idol dramas have emerged as an important phenomenon in Taiwan . . . [and have] impacted the local life style, formation of the youth subculture, consumption patterns, colloquial speech, and even urban planning’ (2004, 109). Asian soaps often show the transformative capacity of consumer culture to change a subject to tell a broader narrative of progress from tradition to modernity. Modernity is depicted as an ideal that can be acquired by indulging in consumption of goods freely available in the marketplace.

Another element that aids the promotion of consumer culture in Asian soap operas is the urban settings in which these soaps are invariably based. Sun (2008, 476) argues that urban experience forms a pervasive cultural template to represent modernity in everyday consumer products in China. Leung notes that urban lifestyle is depicted as the key to modernity with its ‘appeal of novelty’ and ‘the city is portrayed as full of possibilities, where the countryside is seen as backward, sleepy, and only for failures’ (2002, 71). Iwabuchi says that urban lifestyle provides an indispensable visual template for trendy dramas, where the cityscape of Tokyo is depicted as the playground where all consumerist desires are fulfilled and pleasures of a modern life are achieved (2004). Explaining the popularity of this same genre in audiences outside Japan in Taiwan, Ko (2004) says that it is this image of Tokyo as the most progressive and vibrant city in Asia which is idealised by its Taiwanese viewers as the epitome of modernity. Thus it can be seen that the ‘city’ has been identified as a space to engage with modernity and the ‘city is a space in which modernism happens’ (Lash 1990, 31).

These soaps provide a fictional female-centred world of romantic love and family drama in the modern world, in which women’s experiences are privileged and valued. The ubiquitous format of family drama and romance in these soaps is also interwoven with depictions of a modern lifestyle (Bidin 2003; Shahir 2003; Utusan Malaysia 2002). Especially for kampung Malay women in their limited and limiting cultural locales, Asian soaps offer a window to an outside world of consumer culture and a possibility of envisioning ways of being modern. Bidin (2003) and Hamzah (2006) argue that it is the lure of capitalist modernity and modern lifestyle that attracts Malay women to watch Asian soaps.

**Malaysian modernity and the dilemma of Malay women**

While there is no doubt that modernity nowadays is simultaneously everywhere (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1995, 2), the narratives and versions of modernity vary quite considerably, depending on how it is understood, interrogated and conceived in different national or cultural sites. Thus, Taylor suggests that ‘instead of speaking of modernity in the singular, it is better to speak of “alternative modernities”’ (2001, 182). In his book, *Alternative Modernities*, Gaonkar (2001, 15) examines this idea in the context of non-Western nations and shows how these nations strive to produce indigenous versions of modernity that seek to circumvent hegemonic Western models. Chatterjee (1997) suggests that such debates over the models of nationhood and modernity occur in postcolonial nations because these concepts emerged in a Western historical context and are difficult to adapt to longstanding indigenous socio-political contexts. As Goh (2002, 21) puts it, ‘the
multiple cultural formulations of modernity in the contemporary world suggests that “modernity” as experienced in the West is no longer the natural and only destination for all other modernities’.

Malaysia is one such location, where the state has made a call for an alternative model of modernity that is different from hegemonic Western forms and mindful of its traditional sociocultural order (Bunnel 2004). It has proclaimed that Western hegemonic models of modernity should be filtered through the indigenous value systems of Islam, Malay cultural values and Asian values. The paramount importance given to these ideologies also shows that tradition is not seen as something opposed to modernity in this context. As opposed to the normative definition of modernity in the West as a phenomenon antithetical to tradition (Giddens 1991), one might argue that tradition is reconstructed and valorised in new forms in this ideological battlefield for defining an alternative modernity. Tradition is not discarded in the face of modernity but reconstructed as a counter-perspective to negotiate the challenges of a hegemonic ‘Western’ modernity. Such a reinvention of tradition can be seen in all the aspects of Malay modernity. Islamic revivalism in the 1970s brought in a more rigorous Arab-influenced Islam into the country; a loose body of social mores was systematised into a code of behaviour called adat; and an essentialised definition of Asian identity was constructed under the newly coined Asian values discourse in the 1990s. Examining this nexus between tradition and modernity, Sloane (1999, 90) writes that the traditional values of the Malay ‘could not be tossed off, no matter how much individual stood out in the context of modernity’.

As the moral compass of Malaysian modernity, Islam’s stringent tenets about gender norms have politicised the role of Malay women in the modernisation process and issues of gender/sexuality have emerged as the central site for reworking the meaning of ‘modernity’ in Malaysia (Stivens 1998a, 116). In Malaysia, the discussion of women’s role in modernisation is subjected to a different treatment from their male counterparts, where ‘categories of periodisation and the criteria used to define them appear profoundly altered when women become the focal point of enquiry instead of men’ (Felski 1992, 139). Women’s issues are so significant that they are almost representative of the debate over the whole project of alternative modernity and Malay women are frequently deployed as metaphors for the conflicting aspects of modernity (Stivens 1998a). The surveillance of women has become a highly visible arena and a charged ideological battlefield through which the government champions and orchestrates a vision of alternative modernity for the country at large. Women have to undertake a delicate balancing act of pursuing the desirable aspects of modernisation by participating as productive citizens in the economy, while adhering to conventional social mores as devout Muslim women and nurturers of families. In Malay culture, adat is often invoked as a more secular code of general ethics or cultural norms that is seen as a timeless tradition with Malay roots that ‘directly and indirectly defines Malay life’ (Abdullah 1984, 100). Adat offers the framework providing guidance in the more mundane aspects of Malay cultural life such as social etiquette – family values, community interaction and interpersonal socialisation. Adat also stipulates how women should behave in the private domain of their home and public space. As Khoo notes, modernity in Malaysia is ‘full of contradictions: on the one hand, it attempts to delineate the boundary separating the public from the private realms (home and the world) but, on the other hand, modernity also breaches this boundary on its own terms’ (2006, 136).

The most significant clash between morality and the new Malay woman occurred during the industrialisation process in the 1970s with the launch of the New Economic Policy. Building an economic alliance with the advanced East Asian economies of Japan, Korea and Taiwan, Malaysia invited technology transfer and foreign direct investment.
from these countries and there was a massive growth of factories in the Malaysian peninsula. Mostly young rural Malay women were inducted as wage labour in the factories set up under these partnerships (Shamsul 1997).

In her groundbreaking study on rural Malay women in Japanese electronic factories, Ong notes that ‘Malay factory women have become a focus of the expression of ambivalence about economic development and social changes in contemporary Malaysia’ (1990a, 386). Ong (1990b) reports that while parents of these young women wanted them to work in the factories to earn that extra income for the family, they also suffered conflicting anxieties about the honour of their daughters as good Muslim women. The release of these young women into the public domain provoked a public anxiety about their moral impropriety and Malay female factory workers were stereotyped as wasteful and morally flippant (Ong 1987). The new leisure time activities that these young women indulged in – such as going to the cinemas, shopping, displaying interest in fashion, wearing Western clothes and make-up – were criticised as an improper use of their time and money.

Soap operas and anxiety over the cultural impact of consumerism

While the induction of Malay women into the paid workforce, studied by scholars such as Ong (1987, 1990a, 1990b, 2006) and Stivens (1994, 1996, 1998a, 1998b, 2000, 2006), was the major encounter of women with the challenges of modernity in the 1970s and 1980s, the debate has now progressed into another field. The dream of a *Melayu Baru* of the New Economic Policy agenda is now a reality in contemporary Malaysia that has a large middle-class Malay population with sedentary lifestyles and disposable incomes. Malay women have the choice to earn an independent income or stay at home if the family has adequate means. The focus has shifted from issues surrounding women in the factory workforce to the role of women as consumers who can now afford the goods produced in those very factories.

In this new Malaysian landscape of middle-class affluence and consumerism, popular culture through media such as television has now emerged as one of the most important sites for Malay women to engage with modernity. Malay women have unfettered access to such cultural flows brought by television within the private space of their homes and can draw meanings of modernity from these soaps that could potentially challenge the state’s directives.

While the government stresses the need for women to draw ideas and images for a non-Western modernity from these Asian soaps, they also fear the negative impact of consumer culture on the social fabric of Malay society. In Malaysia, consumer culture is not promoted as a positive and salient feature of economic development, but is subjected to scrutiny of ‘intense political and religious contestation’ (Fischer 2008, 35). This contestation is governed by a strict code of what is permissible and what is forbidden by Islamic values, where the Islamic code of *halal/haram* (allowed/forbidden) consistently ‘informs and controls ideas and practices such as the wearing of gold and ornaments; wigs and hairpieces; statues; paintings; photograph; keeping dogs; cleanliness; industries and crafts; sexual appetite; spreading the secret of conjugal life and innumerable other areas’ (Fischer 2008, 29). The Islamic code of consumption is not merely a cultural norm, it is also enforced through public policy. The government has taken comprehensive initiatives, such as establishing the Halal Industry Development Corporation, to bolster the development of *halal* factories in the country and even make the nation a global hub for *halal* products (Utusan Malaysia 2007). Within this larger scenario of monitoring consumption practices according to the Islamic code of *halal/haram*, local authorities have
raised this concern that Asian soaps propagate excessive consumerism that is *haram* or opposed to Islamic values and Malay cultural integrity.

However, Malay women in my research negotiate the depiction of consumer culture in the Asian soap through a world view developed with their cultural resources of *adat* and Islamic values. I have collated feedback from *kampung* Malay women about two main themes of consumer culture in these soaps – self-image and urban lifestyle – to show how Malay women exercise their watching competency as a discerning consumer in negotiating the lures of consumerism within the limits of local cultural norms.

**Soap operas and self-image**

The image of ideal femininity in Malay culture is associated with a genteel, cultivated, groomed, hygienic, beautiful woman in Malay *adat* – beauty is not considered a stand alone physical characteristic of a woman, but mediated through characteristics of genteel and modest femininity or *akhlak yang mulia* (good conduct) as a devoted wife and mother, loyal and respectful, attractive, clean and well groomed (Omar 1994). Furthermore, cultivating one’s physical appearance for beauty is not sanctioned as a free pursuit of individual desire but is prescribed by societal codes which stipulate that physical beautification should only be practised by women to satisfy their husbands and maintain conjugal love in their marriage.

Asian soap operas and their glamorous female characters have been criticised by the local Malay Islamic authorities, especially UMNO. They allege that such images might influence Malay women to not only dress up inappropriately, but also pursue a self-centred desire for beauty that transgresses the boundaries of appropriate femininity. However, I want to argue that while Malay women express their attraction for consumer culture depicted in these Asian soaps, this does not necessarily mean that these women reject Malay cultural conventions. While the growth of celebrity culture in Malaysia may have created commercialised notions of beauty as a physical attribute, *kampung* women in my research still subscribe to the older definition of beauty as a *santun* who is a devoted wife and mother. Consequently, they negotiate their desire to emulate the aspirational images of glamorous female beauty depicted in the Asian soaps through a world view developed with their cultural resources of Islam and *adat* as discerning consumers.

As discerning consumers, some respondents said that they only looked at the images of the glamorous women on the soaps to merely ease their minds after finishing their tiring domestic chores at home. A respondent Hamidah said:

> I just love to watch these glamorous heroines for pleasure (smiling). I cannot wear the kind of outfits they wear. I just find it enjoyable to watch them on the screen (Hamidah, 49, Homemaker).  

Although she may derive pleasure from watching women in these Asian soaps wearing glamorous clothes forbidden by the Islamic code of cultural propriety, it does not mean that she wants to emulate those women. Revealing strict adherence to Islamic values, she straightaway rejects any possibility of wearing such clothes in her actual life and says that she only perceives these glamorous women as a distant spectacle to be enjoyed. This response reflects Hamidah exercising the tactic of a discerning consumer, where she negotiates the pleasure of watching these Asian soaps within the cultural expectations of local social norms regarding female dress.

The use of cosmetics by Malay women to enhance their physical appearance has increasingly become a point of discussion in the local press. A few participants said that they watched Asian soaps specifically to see the latest trends and brands on personal...
grooming and make-up. But these women claimed that they strictly adhered to Malay cultural conventions while using those cosmetics. A regular user of cosmetics, Gayah told us that she normally dressed up and wore some make-up to make herself presentable for her husband when he returned home after a tiring day of work at the plantation. She said:

I guess it is not wrong if we groom ourselves a bit to impress our husbands. Who would want to live with a dirty and impolite wife? In fact, our tradition tells us to do so. Our religion encourages us to pay attention to cleanliness. The problem arises when you over-indulge in such activities. People will talk behind your back if you don’t pay attention to your appearance. It’s important, my dear (Gayah, 46, Homemaker).

Although she cited the glamorous heroine of a Filipino soap opera as her ideal of feminine beauty, she justifies her use of cosmetics as a means of caring for her physical appearance, which is a part of her traditional duty as a wife. Malay cultural conventions defined by Islamic law stipulate that women must cultivate their physical beauty not for personal vanity but only to please their husbands. By conflating her use of cosmetics and idolisation of an Asian soap opera heroine with the Islamic values of appropriate feminine beauty, she exercises the tactic of being a discerning consumer.

A fan of Indonesian soaps Fazilah said that she admired some female characters and the modern outfits they wore:

I love watching Indonesian soaps because I love to see the way the female characters dress up. They look very modern and trendy. I have to admit that I wear short pants at home sometimes. I feel more comfortable doing my housework in shorts because it is too hot to wear a sarong. Well, I only wear short pants inside my house where no one is able to see me (Fazilah, 50, Homemaker).

She is aware that the modern clothes worn by the characters in Indonesian soaps are not permitted in the Islamic code of female dress. But she exercises personal judgment to make use of the freedom of wearing such revealing clothes only within the private space of her home when she is alone, which is allowed by Islamic norms.

Apart from being a discerning consumer who operates within the stipulated norms of Malay culture, there were other responses that showed that women exercise personal judgment in areas where the right behaviour may not be explicitly defined by cultural norms. One respondent said that she exercised great caution in choosing her cosmetics. She said that she not only avoids all products from non-Muslim countries, but also checks products from Muslim countries for a genuine halal certification from Malaysian authorities.

I wish I could have fine skin like the Korean women [on Winter Sonata ]. I always wonder how they manage to retain their beautiful skin and look so young. However, I have to be careful about buying cosmetics from abroad. We can never be sure about the ingredients of imported cosmetics. We need to find out how the item was produced, even if it was imported from Indonesia. That’s why I mostly use our local products. I feel reassured because it has a local halal certificate (Saodah, 43, Homemaker).

A sense of cultural proximity with a Muslim neighbour such as Indonesia may seem sufficient reason to persuade Saodah to use their products. However, she expresses an almost pedantic level of caution about only using products that are genuinely certified as halal by local authorities. Through such cautious scrutiny and scepticism, she displays the watchful competency of a discerning consumer. Here, the mention of halal cosmetics shows that Islamic norms of haram/halal are not resurrected only as a barrier to oppose modern products and practices of consumption, but are often used to authorise or sanction certain practices as legitimate forms of consumption. Thus, the relation between Islam norms and consumer culture is not merely one of opposing foreign practices but of
producing or co-opting certain practices and products within religiously approved modes. These halal cosmetics are not meant to just cater to pious women, but to create certain forms of pious consumption for Muslim Malay women at large.

Although the depiction of glamorous, modern female characters from Asian soap operas may have promoted the consumerist trends of fashion and cosmetics among Malay women, these responses reveal how this issue needs to be explored as a process of negotiation. Instead of the government’s generalisation that women simply follow all trends shown on television, Malay women can be seen as discerning consumers who engage with images of consumerism about self-image and beauty while adhering to Malay cultural values. Malay women perceive the glamorous images of heroines on the soap operas not as ideals to be emulated but as distant spectacles removed from their actual lives. They also maintain the halal/haram code of Islamic law as an important reference in scrutinising the products they consume. Finally, with regards to certain objects that may not transgress any stipulated norms of Malay values, they exercise personal judgment to further exercise their adherence to cultural conventions.

**Soap operas and urban lifestyle**

Another arena of contention over consumerism is the depiction of modern urban lifestyle in Asian soaps, which the authorities fear will encourage materialistic and hedonistic lifestyle among Malay audiences. However, Malay women as discerning consumers negotiate the lures of foreign urban lifestyles within the ideological framework of Malay cultural propriety.

A number of kampung women in this research expressed their interest in the decorative styles of houses depicted in Korean and Indonesian soaps. One respondent said that she watched Indonesian soaps for the beautiful houses to gather some ideas for decorating her own house. She said:

> I just like to watch the houses with their green front yards. They look beautiful and organised. If I had more money to spend, I would like to have such a garden in front of my house too. However, one thing I do not like about Balinese gardens is that they love to put statues for decorative purposes. This is haram in our religion since we are not allowed to use idols (Aminah, 50, Homemaker).

Although Aminah expresses her desire to decorate her home in the same manner as the houses shown in Indonesian soaps, she rejects the use of statues of old Hindu goddesses in Balinese gardens, since any object of art attempting portraiture is considered as idolatry and is haram in Islam.

Respondents also showed interest in the modern urban lifestyles of the characters on the soaps and expressed their own desires to indulge in activities such as shopping and dining out. But they said that one must be able to follow such modern pastimes with moderation. Living in a kampung, Suriati may not follow such a lifestyle on a daily basis, but she still emphasised the need for enjoying these activities within reasonable limits:

> Look, I am married, so I better behave like a married woman. But I can still go out with my friends to shop or eat out in a restaurant. Your social life does not end once you are married. You can go out with friends but make sure that you do not come back too late and your husband knows who you are going out with. We are not like Korean women on the TV dramas. They are free to do anything. I also do not force my daughters to stay home all the time. They need freedom to socialise with their friends. It does not mean that I will give them liberty to do what they want. I will make sure that I know their friends well and they return home on time (Suriati, 50, Homemaker).
Even though Suriati desires some elements of modern lifestyle for herself and her daughters, she seeks to exercise such liberties within limits. She argues that the liberties of a modern lifestyle must be adapted to local cultural expectations. Therefore, she takes her husband’s consent when she goes out, and in turn exercises her control over the children when they go out. She also rejects the hostility and suspicion within certain quarters of the Malay populace about young women going out. As a parent she gives her daughter freedom within reasonable limits but also keeps strict control over her activities. Suriati is aware that social controls curtail personal liberty, but times change and the expectations of a modern lifestyle must be negotiated with each generation.

The purchase of goods and services is a part and parcel of a middle-class lifestyle. However, moderation is also a standard rule in Malay cultural conventions. Respondents are conscious of the lure of consumerism and expressed the need for self-discipline to avoid over-indulgence in a materialistic lifestyle. Although women in the kampung also expressed their interest in the images of modern living, they seemed to be less impressed with conspicuous expenditure and gift-giving. They seemed to be contented with the kampung lifestyle and their desire for social prestige only related to owning some valuable property, which could enhance the financial stability of the family. Roslizawati said:

You don’t need to follow these new-fangled customs of giving gifts for no reason like some city folks. What concerns me is that even important traditional ceremonies are being affected by this culture of ostentatious gift-giving in the kampung. You know we have a tradition of wang hantaran. Nowadays, you must at least offer eight thousands ringgit for wang hantaran. When I was young, wang hantaran was not as expensive as it is now. This is not good. If you don’t have enough money, you will have conflicts in the family over money matters like we see on the television soaps (Roslizawati, 48, Homemaker/Grocery Owner).

Roslizawati rejects the trend of giving gifts as ostentatious consumerist fads that have no place in traditional Malay life. She is also alarmed that this general culture of conspicuous spending and parading of wealth has also attached itself to traditional ceremonies of gift-giving in weddings.

These diverse responses show that Malay women know how to be discerning consumers to find a middle ground between the lures of consumerism embedded in these Asian soaps and the cultural conventions defined by adat and Islam. I have shown this tactic being played out in two areas influenced by consumer culture – self-image and urban lifestyle. The authorities may fear that the glamorous images of women in Asian soaps will prompt Malay women to slavishly use fashion and cosmetics. But I have shown that they actually exercise a number of tactics as discerning consumers who balance the desire of enhancing one’s physical appearance while adhering to cultural conventions. My research also suggests that Malay women are not unduly influenced by the depictions of modern urban lifestyles on foreign soaps and reject excessive consumerism as being culturally and morally inappropriate.

Conclusion

In modern Malaysia, women have to undertake a delicate balancing act of pursuing the desirable aspects of modernisation by participating as productive citizens in the economy while adhering to conventional social mores as devout Muslim women and nurturers of families. By locating this conflict about the reception of soap operas, my study identifies the arena of popular culture, in particular the television genre of soap operas, as a potent
site for constructing meanings of modernity. In contrast to previous sites defining Malaysia’s encounter with modernity, such as the government’s industrialisation projects, it is difficult for the government to directly monitor the attitudes and ideas people derive from watching television programmes in the private space. Women have unfettered access to these Asian soaps within the private space of their homes and can draw meanings of modernity from these soaps that could potentially challenge the state’s directives. In this contestation over the cultural ramifications of modernity, Malay women derive pleasure from the consumerist modernity depicted in the Asian soap operas while remaining mindful of the strictures posed by local culture. As I have seen so far in this research, neither do Malay women submit completely to the patriarchal Malay social order and forego watching these soap operas nor do they resist the structures imposed on them by local culture. In conclusion, I could see them as falling somewhere in between these two positions, deftly vacillating between resistance and submission, in this process of negotiating modernity.

Acknowledgements
I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Ms Wokar Tso Rigumi for her help in conceptualising and editing this article.

Notes
1. *Adat* refers to traditional Malay customs that guide social behaviour and life matters in everyday life.
2. Midday, mid-afternoon and sunset prayers.
3. Village.
4. Kota Tinggi is a small remote town in the southern Malaysian Peninsula, which consist of a large number of unorganised and organised Malay village settlements. Kota Tinggi is also well known for its organised Malay settlements particularly FELDA (Federal Land Development Authority) which was developed under the rule of the former Malaysian Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak. FELDA can be considered as a village because of its remote location. In fact, most of FELDA residents still practise traditional Malay culture such as *gotong royong* (volunteer work). Kota Tinggi is located approximately 42 kilometres from the capital city state of Johore – Johor Bahru – and can be reached easily by ferry from Changi Airport Terminal of Singapore. This area also has a very clear reception of Singapore and Indonesian free-to-air television channels which continually broadcast many Asian soap operas. For more information about FELDA, see Lie and Lund (1994).
5. We must also note here that there is no previous qualitative/theoretical research on popularity of local Malaysian soap operas consumption among Malay women.
6. *Melayu Baru* or new Malay is a term coined by the former Prime Minister, Tun Mahathir Mohammad, to refer to his vision of creating a class of educated middle-class Malays who would lead the modernisation campaign in the nation. See Embong (2002).
7. *Halal/Haram* is a law defining unforbidden/forbidden in Islam that lays down the rules for what can be consumed or not by practicing Muslims. See Fischer (2008).
8. All of our respondents are *kampung* housewives. They stay at home most of the time. Sometimes they participate in communal activities in the neighbourhood.
9. *Wang hantaran* is similar to a dowry. The amount is decided after a consultation between the families of the groom and the bride.

Notes on contributor
Md Azalanshah Md Syed, PhD, is a lecturer in the Department of Media Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Malaya. His research interests are qualitative audience studies, television consumption and popular culture.
References


y=2003&dt=0203&pub=utusan_malaysia&sec=hiburan&pg=hi_02.htm&arc=hive.


Ida, Rachmah. 2006. Watching Indonesian sinetron: Imagining communities around the television. Doctoral diss., Curtin University, Department of Media and Information.


**ABSTRACT TRANSLATIONS**

Las mujeres malayas como espectadoras críticas: telenovelas asiáticas, la cultura de consumo y la negociación de la modernidad

Este artículo estudia cómo las mujeres malayas en las aldeas remotas de Malasia interactúan con las imágenes de la modernidad transnacional que se muestran en las telenovelas importadas de otros países asiáticos. Aunque en un principio el gobierno promovió estas telenovelas asiáticas como vehículos apropiados para el proyecto cultural de modernizar las mentalidades y actitudes de las masas, ahora las autoridades han expresado cierta incomodidad y ambivalencia acerca de la representación excesiva de la cultura del consumo en estas telenovelas, con la que temen se comprometan los valores culturales de las mujeres malayas. Sin embargo, sostengo que las mujeres malayas son espectadoras perspicaces capaces de negociar en forma crítica las imágenes de la cultura...
del consumo en estas novelas, sin necesariamente ignorar sus propios valores culturales o
responsabilidades sociales. Este debate sobre si las telenovelas abren las mentes de las
espectadoras malayas o les enseñan valores degradados de la cultura del consumismo es
parte de una disputa continua sobre las ramificaciones culturales de la modernidad en
Malasia. Este género televisivo de las telenovelas asiáticas puede ser conceptualizado
como un sitio de negociación de la modernidad, donde las mujeres malayas obtienen
placer de la modernidad consumista mostrada en las telenovelas asiáticas mientras se
mantienen conscientes de las restricciones que plantea la cultura local.

Palabras claves: mujeres malayas; modernidad; Malasia; telenovela; cultura del consumo

马来女性做有区辨能力的观者：亚洲电视肥皂剧, 消费文化与协商现代性

本文检视马来西亚偏远村落中的马来女性, 如何接触自其他亚洲国家进口的流行电
视剧中所呈现的跨国现代性影像。过去政府将这些亚洲电视肥皂剧视为促进大众
心灵与态度现代化之文化计划的适当工具, 今日当局者却开始对这些电视剧中过度
再现的消费文化显露出不安与矛盾的态度, 深怕它们将会危及马来女性的文化价
值。但我主张, 马来女性是具有区辨能力的观者, 能够批判性地协商这些电视剧中
的消费文化影像, 而不必然忽略自身的文化价值或社会责任。有关电视肥皂剧到底
是开展马来女性观众的心灵, 亦或是传授马来女性孏落的消费文化价值之争论, 实
则属于马来西亚持续不断议论现代性文化后果的一部分。这些亚洲电视肥皂剧的
文类可被概念化为协商现代性的场域, 马来女性从这些亚洲电视肥皂剧描摹的消费
现代性中获得愉悦的同时, 仍然留心在地文化对它提出的苛责。

关键词：马来女性; 现代性; 马来西亚; 电视肥皂剧; 消费文